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ABSTRACT

A survey of Oklahoma businesses dealing in international trade shows that these firms need personnel skilled in foreign languages. Career areas in which these skills are needed are varied, and applicants with language proficiency in addition to other skills could have an advantage over other applicants. Some respondents commented that language teaching methods and content should be changed. Of firms responding, only one-quarter currently use employees with foreign language skills, but over half would use them if available. About half indicated that a future expansion would create demand for foreign language skills. Languages considered most useful were Spanish (by 90.3% of respondents), French, German and Japanese, with Arabic, Italian and Russian also noted by several. Over half of those surveyed would desire at least conversational ability, and about one-third would need translation, composition and technical language skills. Personnel in sales, engineering and clerical work would be most likely to need foreign languages. (CLK)

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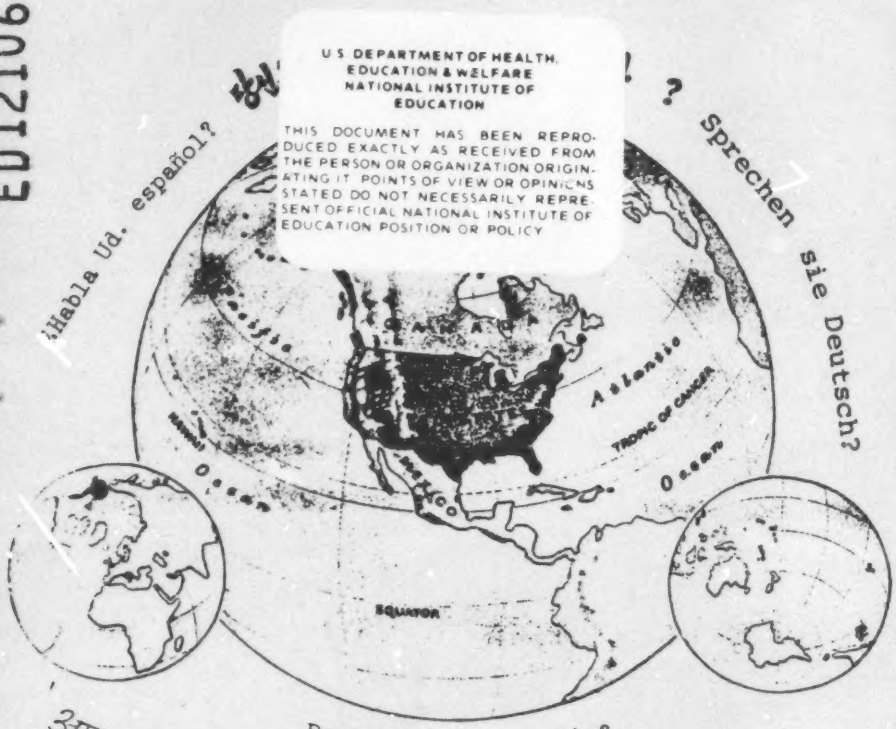

FL007522

The World of Work

In Every Language

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Leslie Fisher, State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Preface

Since World War II the growth of world trade has been explosive for U.S. businesses. Our dominance of the international marketplace has frequently been such that many Americans thought that English would become *the* dominant language of business everywhere. And for a time in the recent past, it was true. We could *require* that anyone wanting our business communicate in English. We didn't have the time or inclination to learn their languages.

But the scene may be changing. With the growth of independence and nationalism everywhere, as well as our increasing reliance on foreign sources of petroleum, businessmen in other countries *can and do* insist that we deal with them on their terms and in their languages.

More and more our businessmen find that they must work to keep the momentum and competitive edge they have gained during the past 30 years. Knowing a customer's habits and customs as well as his language may be just the thing required of us in the future to keep that edge.

How do businesses *in Oklahoma* feel about the situation? It was with this in mind that we in the Oklahoma Department of Education decided to undertake the survey discussed herein. We feel that the results will be of interest to a wide range of personnel: students, parents, teachers, school administrators and counselors, as well as the Oklahoma business community.

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Introduction and Background of the Survey

Interest in the need for foreign language skills in various career fields has been growing on the national scene. In 1972, the Federal government commissioned the Modern Language Association to survey business and corporation executives in the United States to see if they felt that knowledge of another language and culture would be a desirable skill for their employees. The authors and compilors of the report, Lucille J. Honig and Richard I. Brod, covered such fields as business, industry and commerce; civil service; education; law; library science; media; science; service; social sciences; and travel and tourism.

The report they produced is easily read and presents a clear-cut answer of YES; on the national scene we "do use, could use, or expect to use people with foreign language skills." The pamphlet is titled: *Foreign Languages and Careers* and can be ordered from the Modern Language Association, 62 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10011.

But in discussing this general topic with teachers, counselors and other school personnel, we in the Oklahoma Department of Education often seemed to get responses such as: "Well, that's fine if one lives on the east or west coasts, but do those needs exist here in Oklahoma?" We decided to find out.

Suggestions and ideas were sought from the Tulsa and Oklahoma City Chambers of Commerce, the Oklahoma liaison person from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Oklahoma Industrial Development Department, and University personnel with an interest in international trade.

The most comprehensive listing of Oklahoma businesses which are either already involved in international trade or which are seeking to become involved is found in the World Trade Section of the *Directory of Oklahoma Manufacturers*, produced by the Oklahoma Industrial Development Department. It was decided that those persons and businesses listed would be the target of a mail survey which would ask to what extent foreign language skills *are* being used or if they feel that such skills *need to be developed* for business purposes. Two comments received among many others are typical: the administrative assistant of a manufacturer of welded pipe said: "Facility with a foreign language is *always* helpful in any business with connections overseas." And the president of a manufacturer of air cooling equipment declared: "Commercial relationships with other countries leave our people a little embarrassed and humbled by their *one* language limitation." (Emphasis theirs.)

There are 493 businesses listed in the 1974 edition of the World Trade Section of the *Directory*. Survey instruments were sent to the senior official named — president, vice-president, plant manager, etc. Twenty-four of the surveys were returned by the post office as undeliverable which left 469 which we presume to have been received. The number of instruments returned to us by firms was 110 and gives us a return rate of 23.45%. We were pleased with this kind of response to an unsolicited survey by some very busy people. Following is an outline of the questions we asked and responses received along with some editorial comment on our part.

Do Oklahoma firms currently use employees with foreign language skills?

Yes – 27.5% No – 72.5%

When we remember that the polled firms were already dealing in international trade or wishing to do so, one might wonder why there is not a greater use of personnel with language skills. Subsequent items on the questionnaire help to clarify this for us.

Would Oklahoma firms use such employees if they were available?

Yes – 52.1% No – 47.9%

The majority of our respondents apparently appreciate the need for more personnel in their companies who have language skills, but have not been able to find them. Of course, this becomes more complex when one considers the types of jobs that would require the additional language skills and the survey attempted to approach this problem in later items.

Is there a possibility that a business expansion or change in operation will, in the future, increase the Oklahoma firms' demand for employees with skills in other languages?

Yes – 51.0% No – 49.0%

The respondents, persons charged with directing the future growth of their enterprises, seem to anticipate an increasing need in this area. The president of one manufacturing company said: "This is an urgent matter. Foreign trade necessitates more than one language. Our economic survival demands it. Opportunities *unlimited* for any bilingual employee." (His emphasis.) A general manager of another equipment manufacturer stated: "In this day, bilingual skills should certainly be an asset," while the president of a steel fabrication company said: "For the future we would like to stress the importance of young persons learning various languages." The vice-president of a manufacturer of air cooled heat transfer equipment noted: "Opportunities for world wide trade are increasing and will continue to increase," and an executive for a large construction machinery manufacturer observed that, "The world is shrinking rapidly from a logistical, business and communications standpoint."

What languages would Oklahoma businessmen find most useful in their international trade?

The majority of respondents listed more than one language which would be useful by personnel in their firms. This item was marked at least once by 65.5% of the respondents.

Spanish	**90.3%**	**Arabic**	**9.7%**
French	**56.9%**	**Italian**	**6.9%**
German	**45.8%**	**Russian**	**6.9%**
Japanese	**30.4%**		

Other languages written in at least once were: Portuguese, Norwegian, Yugoslavian, Farsi (language of Iran), Vietnamese and "other Asian languages" presumably those other than Japanese and Vietnamese.

The vice-president of a publishing company said: "Many students of economic and social growth point to Central and South America as the next 'book areas' in the world. For this reason persons fluent in English and Spanish and Portuguese place themselves in advantageous positions professionally." A vice-president of a control systems manufacturing firm said: "Our primary interest is Spanish," while the owner of another manufacturing plant said: "If my company were to expand, it would need Spanish-speaking skills."

What degree of skill in the foreign language would be most desirable for an employee of one of these Oklahoma businesses?

In order to find out how much language an employee would need to know, we asked this question. One vice-president of a geophysical supply company said: "A fairly low degree of proficiency in any romance language would be useful." The following chart shows the responses:

Conversation (able to meet people who speak another language, or get around in another country) – **52.7%**

Translation (able to translate conversation for others) – **27.4%**

Composition (able to write letters, manuals, instructions in the foreign language) – **34.9%**

Technical (able to converse with a technical or professional person using a technical vocabulary) – **34.9%**

Commenting on the degree of skill in another language, the regional manager in charge of international sales for equipment used by the petroleum industry said: "A person with complete command of a foreign language is of more value in dealing with all the aspects of foreign marketing. However, it has been my personal experience [that] being conversational to enable one to move around freely is of initial importance . . . The man sitting opposite you appreciates your speaking his language, even if it's to greet one another or discuss the weather, etc., – if you are not completely bilingual."

What are the technical or professional career areas where Oklahoma businesses would like to have employees with foreign language skills?

Sales	**60.0%**	**Production**	**18.6%**
Engineering	**47.1%**	**Management**	**18.6%**
Clerical	**32.8%**	**Accounting**	**10.0%**

Others listed at least once: technical writing, printing industry, flight attendants, oil exploration, chemistry.

We asked this question to show the wide area of careers which lend themselves to a need of skill in foreign languages. This should especially be of interest to the student who asks: "I like foreign languages, but I don't want to teach them. What else can I do with a language?" Our survey notes that the highest percentages of businesses want language skills by their employees in *clerical, sales and engineering* areas! These are three areas that many, many American students eventually find employment in, but none of them are known for encouraging students to acquire skills in other languages during their preprofessional training. The president of a world-wide oil exploration company based in Tulsa said recently: "We operate in 28 different countries. I need people in my accounting and clerical departments who can at least help interpret the bills we receive in 28 languages!"

In Oklahoma businesses, other things being equal, would foreign language skills be an advantage for initial employment, salary increases or advancement opportunities?

Yes – 52.2% **No – 47.8%**

We note here that the majority of firms polled, given two applicants with equal capabilities, but one having a foreign language skill, the one with the language would be given preference. The manager for a computer control systems firm said: "As overseas sales become important these additional skills will be an asset for an employee." One employer stated that he automatically gave a $50 per month bonus to his lowest paid clerical employees if they had some skill in a foreign language. The manager of a plant making aluminum products explained it this way: "We are a small company and it would not be practical to hire someone solely for their language skills; however, if a person had the other skills we were looking for as well, it is possible he would take preference over the applicant without the language skills."

In preparing our survey instrument, we had the impression that some of our respondents might have strong feelings about our topic and might, therefore, like to have the opportunity to talk more fully with someone about it. For this reason, we included the following two items:

Would you be willing to be interviewed more in depth on this subject?

Yes – 31.2%

Would you be willing to speak to student and adult groups on this subject?

Yes – 10.9%

Again, when we consider the target of our survey – busy, top-level executives – we feel that this kind of response indicates very strong, positive attitudes toward the topic.

Summary

Our survey of Oklahoma businesses dealing in international trade leads us to believe that these firms do indeed have a need for personnel who have skills in a foreign language. The career areas in which these skills are needed are varied and, in many cases, the job applicant who is well-prepared in his or her job area and who has the added plus of some skill in a foreign language will receive either preference in employment and/or salary advancement opportunities. Business opportunities abroad are growing and employees are needed now and in the immediate future who have skills in *many* different languages, not just one or two.

We would like to re-emphasize that our survey was done ONLY with *Oklahoma* firms. Most certainly those of us in the business of trying to prepare our young people adequately for their futures should take this information into account when counseling them.

Two or three comments were made by respondents which are of specific interest to today's foreign language teacher. They are noted here without further comment or elaboration.

President, food and chemical processing machinery manufacturer: "The past methods used to teach language are not proving acceptable in the business field, and the method is antiquated."

Office manager, manufacturer of engine replacement parts: "Foreign language students and classes should exchange business documents with English classes in Latin America."

A clerk for a hospital lab equipment manufacturer said: "I personally have had a total of seven years of language in school and learned nothing useful. The Spanish taught in school should be more useful to the business world. Except for greeting Mexicans, and some Spanish, you only learn monitored conversations." The respondent goes into examples of useless material learned by rote and concludes, "I realize this is all necessary but the only suggestion I would have is that not the method but the text be changed."